

# Patterns and Politics. Cultural Memory in Poland After 1989

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**Abstract:** This article analyzes contemporary cultural memory in Poland with the mechanisms of its changes, ways of influencing it and actors that are engaged in these activities. The complex relations between its components arrange shapes which can be described as paralysis, clash, and struggle patterns.

**Keywords:** cultural memory, politics of memory, Katyn massacre, martial law in Poland, Warsaw uprising, memory field, patterns of memory

## I. INTRODUCTION

Aleida Assmann's works define the term 'cultural memory' as a specific construct, plural, dynamic, and political and the same time. Cultural memory is a constant process of transformation and reconstruction – as it uses various media, serves the purposes of different groups, and frames the experience of different individuals. To quote Assmann:

"Cultural memory is also an art of memory, based on different media at the disposal of a larger group, thus enhancing the collective knowledge of its members about the past, their way of life, their values, important references and common orientations. This memory is a

prosthetic device, an externalized and reinternalizable collective creation that is transmitted and transformed over time and reshaped by succeeding generations" [Assmann, 2011: 395].

Assmann shows how the boundary between the individual and what transcends the individual (e.g. community, media, or culture) blurs when it comes to analyzing memory practices. What is remembered is constantly being shaped and modified in interactions between human memories and cultural memory, its media and politics.

In my research I focus on analysing these entangled memory practices, which are expressed, transformed and reconstructed by and through cultural texts. I consider cultural memory, which manifests itself via a variety of media and is shaped by diverse politics, within its social context, trying to determine which moments are important for the memory of the community. My main area of interest is past events which, in a special way, serve as present centres of cultural memory and key topics of memory texts.

The aim of my research project was to create a map of Polish cultural memory after 1989, discussing the

mechanisms of its changes, ways of influencing it, and actors that are engaged in these activities [Nijakowski, 2008: 41-46]. I focused on three events of 20th century Polish history – the Katyn massacre (1940), the Warsaw uprising (1944) and the introduction of martial law (1981-1983). I have chosen them due to several reasons. First, there is an outstanding number of memory texts referring to them and the knowledge about them is common. The second reason is the importance of their role as framing events while thinking about the past. What is more, actions aiming at shaping their images (politics of memory) are especially intense. Finally, there is a variety of versions of memory that are produced this way. Consequently, these three events are specific centres of Polish cultural memory, often recollected in national ceremonies as well as in children's books, as they tend to be seen as fundamental, playing a special part in history. In contemporary Polish culture, they are constantly retold and reinterpreted, often within incompatible discourses and various visions of the past. Memory culture thus produces different ways in which these experiences are articulated and expressed, but is also influenced by the intensive politics of memory.

Having analyzed the Polish cultural memory field in my previous research, in this paper I will attempt to show how each of the above-mentioned events can be associated with a specific pattern of remembrance, using brief examples to illustrate the patterns' functioning. My previous work concentrated on distinguishing the mechanisms of remembering which organize the cultural memory in each case, such as figures of speech or main ideas typical for each of the mentioned events. This can be described as - to quote Jeffrey K. Olick - identifying "memory genres" - "pat-

terns of speaking [or: remembering - MK] structured as a set of conventions against which or within which the utterances are produced and read" [Olick, 2007: 59]. It is my goal in this article to go one step further: from identifying the patterns followed by many memory texts concerned with the specific topic to naming the main pattern of the whole memory complex. For the former, I intended to investigate how, for instance, "the Warsaw uprising" idea is constructed in memory texts. As for the latter, the idea in question is the general shape of the memory of the uprising and the relations between its components: different texts and practices.

To begin with, I would like to name the distinguished memory patterns. In the case of the Katyn massacre, we have a pattern of 'a paralysed memory.' With regards to martial law, it is a clash of memories. Finally, when it comes to the uprising, we are dealing with a constant mnemonic struggle. Although it is a form of generalisation, I believe it can be more than useful in reconstructing the general mechanisms of activating the past in order to construct Polish identity (or identities) and the politics of memory which are involved.

## II. KATYN, OR A PARALYSIS

The so-called Katyn massacre, the mass execution of Polish officers carried out by NKVD in 1940, is the core of the specific traumatic complex. In September, 1939 Poland was invaded not only by Nazi Germany, but also, two weeks later, on September 17th, by the Soviet Union. The imprisoned and deported Polish soldiers and policemen were executed (by a firing squad) by the orders of the Soviet Politburo in several places in

the Soviet Union, among which the forest near the village of Katyn is the best known location. The execution was kept a secret, so the fate of the officers wasn't known to the Polish officials, nor to their families. A year later, in June, 1941, the non-aggression pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union was broken. In April, 1943, the Nazi propaganda leaders announced the discovery of mass graves of Polish officers in the Katyn forest, charging the Soviets with carrying out the massacre in 1940. This essentially truthful story was prepared to be used to disturb the Allies, and it partly worked. The Soviet Union denied the charges and claimed the victims were executed by the invading German army in 1941.

That was the beginning of the falsification of the Katyn massacre history. After the end of WW2, when the pro-Soviet government was established in Poland, and during over 40 years of the regime of The People's Republic of Poland, any public mention of Katyn was banned and the Nazi Germany was still being accused of the crime. The Soviet responsibility for the massacres was not officially confirmed until the 90s [Przeźwiński, Adamska, 2010].

Consequently, the untold Katyn trauma could not have been worked through because of political reasons, and I wish to propose a thesis that after this delay, it was too late for Polish culture to deal with it. What is more, in view of the political uses of the traumatic event as a basis of national identity, the aftershock of Katyn can never end, as it is still preserved by the politics of memory in contemporary Poland. Significantly, the majority of texts concentrate on endlessly acting out the massacre, persistently using the same clichéd images, and copying several basic stories and schemes which follow a kind of catalogue of rules of the 'mem-

ory field' [Olick. 2007: 92-97]. It also applies to the documentary films about this crime, most using similar sceneries and props, through the commemoration ceremonies, copying the same schematic rites, to literary texts, repeating fixed vocabulary.

The cemetery monuments in Katyn, Kharkiv and Mednoye are particularly significant in this context, as all three were built according to the same project, chosen in a contest organized by the Council for the Protection of Struggle and Martyrdom Sites in 1996. The center of every cemetery is a big memorial wall with the victims' names on it, symbolizing gate and – according to the artists' comments – resembling the stone from the tomb of Jesus Christ. Below the gate, in an underground cave, there is a bell. Its ringing, though muffled, means that the truth cannot be hidden, and in front of the bell, there is an altar. The recreation of the very same structure in each memorial site can be interpreted as an assumption of certain universality. The cemetery serves as a layout for memory practices and as there is only one design of the first, there is symbolically no place for the variety of the latter.

These questions appear particularly pressing in the case of a specific part of the Katyn memory field, which is poetry surrounding the crime, as there exist mainly amateur, unoriginal poems, and minor artwork often reveal its rules more easily. Due to space limitations, I will use the examples from a wider collection of already analyzed texts [Kobielska, 2012], compiled in the anthology "Katyn in Literature" [Krzyżanowski, 2010] in order to focus on the aforementioned catalogue of clichés.

The model of "a Katyn poem" can be identified not only on the basis of the common topic, but also standard poetics, images, and figures of speech. What is

more, it is detached from mainstream Polish poetry of the 2nd half of the 20th century, and sometimes it draws on obsolete or eccentric forms, such as the 19th century patriotic poetry. The ideological core of this poetry is patriotism understood as constructed on the basis of the martyrdom of the victims and the memory of the living, inevitably linked with a religious, mainly catholic, paradigm. It is represented by themes belonging to three main groups: images of nature, religious figures, and objects-relics found in the exhumation.

As for nature imagery, the Katyn forest is the setting of dozens of poems, in which it is basically seen as a witness, favoring the victims, indignant and transmitting the knowledge about the crime – the shape of the trees or the sound of the wind becomes a message for the living. In many cases a close relation between nature and people is involved – e.g., as the trees grow on graves, feeding off the remnants of the bodies, they can be identified with the dead and represent their resurrection or their return home.

As regards the religious themes, there are two dominating figures in the Katyn poetry: Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary. In the first case, the fate of the victims is compared to Christ's sacrifice, so their walk to the place of execution becomes a revision of the Way of the Cross. The mourning Holy Mother completes the image and it is her task to soothe the pain and to bring the souls of the victims back to their homeland. Such poems often take the form of prayers.

The poems therefore create specific "memory tools", anchoring the memory in nature and supporting it supernaturally. The objects-relics I mentioned before help in the particular Polish 'duty' to remember repre-

sented by this particular vision. The remains and personal belongings which were found in exhumed mass graves became memory requisites recognizable as emblems of the Katyn victims. Bone fragments, crosses, photos, letters, notes, prayer books, shredded clothing, often appearing in long enumerations, are souvenirs forming a base on which memory should be constructed, along with the story of the last days of the deceased.

All things considered, on the basis of this catalogue of the Katyn memory elements it is clear that using a synecdoche is a popular strategy of commemorative texts that avoid addressing the crime directly and prefer to call it by the name of something indirectly associated with it. The aforementioned images' function is to stand for the whole massacre. Furthermore, their variety is limited: the same clichés are repeated in similar ways. This perseverance proves the strength of the Katyn memory 'rules'. There are hardly any texts in this field that would go against those rules in a way and become a rebellious provocation. The most original attempts are still subjected to some principles I mentioned, while the majority of texts widely multiply and copy the tried and tested ways of remembering and expressing the remembrance.

That is why the pattern of paralysis is appropriate here: the cultural memory about the Katyn massacre is petrified in endless perseverance and compulsory recalling and reactivating the past suffering. It repeats and preserves the dominant model of remembering and referring to the past, thus preventing from confronting the traumatic past, working it through, and self-reflecting.

### III. MARTIAL LAW, OR A CLASH

Martial law was introduced in Poland by the communist regime on December 13th, 1981, which is nowadays the most recognizable date in post-war Polish history. The authoritarian government, with its leader Wojciech Jaruzelski, wanted to enforce their rule over the country due to the anti-communist opposition of the Solidarity movement, which was growing in strength, gaining popularity and power. According to the government's arguments, martial law was necessary to ensure order and security in Poland, also preventing the alleged Soviet intervention. On many levels, the restrictions of regular life lasted until July, 1983. During 19 months of martial law the Solidarity activists were interned and arrested with no charges, while the organization itself was outlawed; the communication was severely restricted. Over 90 deaths are attributed to martial law, including the workers of the Wujek Coal Mine, shot during the strike.

But what makes the martial law special is the polarization and black-and-white attitudes towards the event, which took shape after the decline of the regime in 1989. While some call it a Polish-Polish or Polish-Jaruzelski war, seeing it as a deadly conflict in which the 'true' Poland was attacked by its own – but consequently, non-Polish – authorities, others argue that it was a 'lesser of two evils' (with the possible Soviet invasion as the alternative), and that General Jaruzelski's decision was best under the circumstances, or even that it was a heroic move.

This first, 'historic' level of discussion is complicated by the later political situation, because the history of martial law is even more important in the context of the status of the contemporary Polish state, formed

after 1989. It involved General Jaruzelski, who initiated the process of the Communist regime surrendering its power, and was for a short time the first President of Poland. The newly established state is now being criticised by some who believe that there should have been a real revolution and that it was an act of treason to negotiate with the former regime, who were the murderers of 1981. Conversely, the mainstream version talks about the full success of the Polish transformation route after 1989, in which the cooperation and non-violent negotiations with the regime was a necessary start; Jaruzelski can therefore be seen as a tragic figure of a righteous statesman. At the moment, Jaruzelski is still on trial, while the proceedings can never end; according to the polls over 40% of Poles understand or support his decision from 1981 and approximately 30% consider it inappropriate [Centre for Public Opinion Research, 2011].

Consequently, among the memory texts concerned with martial law such as feature films, two main opposing models can be distinguished. The first one is martyrological, presenting the winter of 1981 as a time of fighting (or even war), and the brutality of the army as well as the persecution led by the evil regime is a main theme. The second concentrates on a certain 'deheroisation' effect, introducing humor and scenes of everyday life as the setting. Interestingly enough, the tragic narrative about the Polish fate in a way continues the Katyn story described above; while in the Katyn case of a paralysis tragedy is the only possible genre, as regards the martial law it is one of colliding visions. Furthermore, the visions do not really influence each other nor do their supporters communicate, and there is hardly any place for a new one, so the term 'memory clash' seems appropriate in this case.

The figure of Jaruzelski is essential for the cultural image of the martial law. The image of him on the TV screen on Sunday morning of December 13th, interrupting a children's TV show with his announcement has become a highly recognizable symbol of the event, a cliché of cultural memory. As a consequence, he became – literally and metaphorically – the face of the martial law, embodying the complexity of the problem. To illustrate the memory clash I will thus use the examples that concern the General directly – both as a person and as an abstract emblem.

In a nutshell, it would be sufficient to have a look at the picketing which takes place every December the 13th, on the anniversary of the introduction of martial law, especially in the close surroundings of Jaruzelski's villa in Warsaw [Polish Press Agency, 2008]. A street protest by Jaruzelski's opponents often resembles a form of a happening: the participants gather at night in front of his house, turn on red spotlights, arrange crosses using candles, and recite a list of victims of the martial law at noon. They also sing the national anthem and other patriotic songs, chant slogans and present banners demanding to send Jaruzelski to prison and calling him a criminal. The form of the protests is thus very harsh and purposefully aimed not only at expressing people's beliefs, but also at practically disturbing a particular person – the enemy. The power of the tools clearly shows how strong and implacable the opinions are.

What is more, this type of demonstration symbolically clashes with a small group of Jaruzelski's supporters. They form a counter-demonstration at the same time, praising the General, arguing that he saved the motherland by introducing the martial law, wishing him

a long life, and – similarly to the General's critics – singing the Polish anthem. Both sides don't hesitate to insult each other, nor to present abusive slogans. Thus, every year on the night of December the 13th, in a tiny street in Warsaw, two memories of the martial law clash, with no chance to communicate at all.

The clash has certain underlying political context and cannot be interpreted without it, but the division lines are not so obvious. Jaruzelski's critics are from the right side of the political scene, since the politics of memory led by the right wing is closely connected to the martyrological vision of the martial law and the post-war period as a whole. At the same time, the conservatives tend to criticise the Polish state after the transition. The second tendency I mentioned – that of 'deheroisation' – is also present in shaping the cultural image of Jaruzelski; his emblematic picture is being re-used in a nostalgic or humorous way, which is evident, for instance, in Internet memes exploiting his announcement screenshot from December the 13th. This is obviously impossible to fit into the vision in which the martial law is a deadly serious event, revealing the tragic pattern of Polish history and the crucial factors which shaped contemporary Poland.

The figure of Jaruzelski becomes an inconvenient – so to speak – site of memory, in which the clashing memories of the martial law can reveal their current political motivations. The memory practices are in this case plural, but their field as a general structure occurs to be one more time petrified. The pattern of the clashes is as well a pattern of clinch, in which nothing new can be said and the memory culture serves to confirm the already-taken positions towards the past and the present.

#### IV. WARSAW UPRISING, OR A STRUGGLE

The Warsaw uprising (1944) is a great example of the dynamics of memory. Organized against the Nazi occupation, it could become a bone of contention between the Soviet Union and the Western Allies. The cause of about 200,000 deaths, it was twisted by the post-war Polish propaganda. Representing a tragic pattern of Polish history, it was transformed into a widely discussed issue of politics of memory. Was the decision to start the uprising reasonable? – it is a politically influenced question impossible to resolve, and yet it is an important part of Polish memory culture, discussed endlessly not only among historians. Moreover, the event is being continuously recalled and utilized nowadays, so that it has become a cultural (and pop-cultural) icon.

The 60th anniversary of the uprising was a turning point in Polish memory culture. In 2004 the Museum of the Warsaw Uprising was opened – the first such institution in Poland with a highly appealing exposition. It represents a coherent vision of the past as an example to the present, which is going to be a conscious actor in the memory field, producing and shaping the memory of the uprising [Żychlińska, 2009]. It was the beginning of a „Rising '44 boom” in Polish culture, when history became an attractive topic and the setting for a variety of artistic and pop cultural projects, from literature to historical reenactments.

What distinguishes the case of the uprising from the previous ones is the variety of struggling versions of its memory produced by the media. There are, for example, civilian stories about the tragedy of everyday life during the uprising or uprising ‘herstories’ retrieving the feminine past, in contrast to the heroic military

narrative. The uprising memory field is interesting because – contrary to the paralysis and clash patterns – it is actually an active battlefield, where the memories, so to speak, ‘wrestle’ each other, temporarily gaining the advantage and shaping the public’s opinions. But it doesn’t mean that there is no hierarchy in the field and that its rules just form spontaneously. The Museum has the hegemonic position on the field (which it created in great part) and the impact of the critical memory texts is much weaker. Some of them even play – involuntarily – the role of licensed opposition, in a way controlled by the hegemony.

The source of this hegemony is both the shape of the Museum’s exhibition and its strategy to patronize other commemoration projects, e.g. while announcing art competitions or co-producing concerts and spectacles. As for the first aspect, I will briefly investigate the very beginning of the exhibition and the most powerful means used to influence visitors’ experience.

The permanent exhibition’s opening and closing shape the visitors’ interpretation of the past. Its first part consists of audio- and audiovisual testimonies. In five old-fashioned phone boxes the insurgents’ tales can be heard – a visitor has to select a person to listen, each of whom is shown in a board with a big portrait photo (in later life) and a short title of their story. This is the place where the speaking subject – or a narrator’s perspective – is established, on the basis of the appealing setup of the testimonies using technology and interactive multimedia. All the five speakers are heroic soldiers of the uprising – there is no representative of the civilians, who are present in the Museum’s story as one of its ‘objects’, a background collective character, rather than as a subject of their own story of suffering. A video of Jan Nowak-Jeziorański, the fa-

mous emissary between the Polish government in London and the Home Army, completes the introduction. Jeziorański's effort is to argue that the uprising was inevitable, "as a volcano explosion, which you can't prevent". Consequently, debating the decision of starting the uprising and the responsibility of its leaders seems pointless. There was no alternative and the only decent thing to do was to fight; whoever does not agree with it, simply cannot understand the occupied Warsaw's situation. The Museum's message is a performative, establishing a community built on accepting emblems and opinions – and on excluding those who don't support (meaning that they don't understand properly) the uprising [Żukowski, 2006: 29].

It has to be asked how these strategies can be efficient, or – in other words – how the exhibition is designed to reach such goals. There are many comments emphasizing the Museum's attractiveness, its ability to create an unique impression and to involve the visitors. Firstly, there is a variety of elements, objects, documents and multimedia which are presented in many different ways, and they cannot all be seen during a passive stroll – which forces the visitors to interact with the elements of the exposition. Secondly, the Museum's space is created by the complicated structure of intensive visual, audio, somatic and affective impulses. The central object of the Museum – the so-called Monument, a huge steel block rising from the ground floor to the roof of the whole building, covered with dates of the succeeding days of the uprising and bullet traces, combines all these possibilities. It emits subtle sounds of insurgent Warsaw – to hear them, one has to touch it, put an ear to it; it also pulsates, imitating heartbeats – 63 a minute (like the number of days the uprising lasted), which can be heard in every corner of

the Museum. Eventually, they are neutralized in the visitors' experience, forming a kind of background noise. Introducing a constant, regular sound, they are also experienced directly by the body in form of vibrations. The Museum thus 'implants' the uprising in the bodies of the visitors, producing the experience not only engaging their whole attention, but also received unconsciously.

The second aspect of the Museum's power is its "external" role – it supports a number of other projects concerned with the uprising (from a feminist webpage about 'herstories' to patriotic sing-alongs in the streets of Warsaw), providing both financial and organizational support. Its essential assistance, also concerning projects that see the uprising differently from the vision presented in the Museum, cannot be overestimated – but the situation creates as well a significant configuration of powers.

A good example would be a theater play prepared especially for the recent 69<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the uprising in the very space of the Museum, and founded and co-produced by the Museum itself. The play titled 'A Stone Heaven Instead of Stars' (Polish 'Kamienne niebo zamiast gwiazd', by Krzysztof Garbaczewski and Marcin Cecko) is nonetheless the most daring critique of the politics of memory led by the Museum which could be seen in recent years. The artists introduce a group of zombies in the space of the Museum exhibition, using them as a metaphor of contagious post-memory produced in its laboratory in order to convince the young visitors that the uprising was simply 'cool'. The spectacle is full of forgotten figures, banned memories, and reveals the kitsch of the Museum's narrative. Poetic in nature, the 'playtext' changes perspectives, times and places, but one of the most signifi-



cant locations is a ruined cellar, where a group of civilians is going through hell trying to save their lives during the combats. One of the character says:

"It shouldn't be told. It shouldn't be passed. Not to harm anyone. I thought that when we get out we should set up a museum of our stay here. I would even like to fund it, but after what I've been through – no. The documents have to be destroyed. They will always be used against what happened" [Cecko, 2013: 3].

Thus, in the spectacle, the museum is shown as an institution skilled in transferring made-up (and possibly harmful) narratives and role models, but unable to do justice to the unheroic, brutal experience which doesn't fit into its frames. This critique applies clearly to the Museum of Warsaw Uprising, where the characters are trapped during the first nights' shows. The aim of the spectacle is not simply to propose an opposing vision, but to analyze and discuss the position of the Museum – as well as the spectacle's own – in the memory field, to consciously transform the hegemonic narrative, showing its seams and backsides.

However, the dominant position of the Museum is so strong that it can easily afford to host Garbaczewski's spectacle. The target groups (visitors and spectators) are different and the possible impact of the brilliant critique will remain – needless to say – limited. The Museum can let it in, because it will not leave any lasting trace on the luminous and vibrating surface of its exhibition. The rule of the field is hence constant struggle, while the uprising memory is being rewritten and analyzed; but the leader is, for the time being, already known.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

Having considered the specificity of each analyzed event in relation to the general mechanisms of activating the past, I believe that the presented patterns organize the process of remembering in contemporary Polish culture. The complex relations between the components of cultural memory arrange shapes which can be described – starting from the most static, petrified, to the most dynamic, various one – as paralysis, clash, and struggle patterns. However, two remarks have to be made in the end. Firstly, there are partial reflections of one model in another, e.g. certain fragments of the 'struggling' memory field can be 'paralyzed'; secondly, in each case – including the most dynamic and diverse fields – centers of power and hierarchy can be distinguished, since they are produced by the politics of memory as well as by constant transformations of memory media. The interferences of the patterns and their reasons could be only briefly indicated in this paper; one of the most interesting topics for further research is the question if – or how – they are able to change their trajectories.

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